

Viral Gastroenteritis

Fact Sheet

What is Viral Gastroenteritis?

Viral Gastroenteritis is a common infection of the stomach and intestines that results in vomiting and diarrhoea. It can be caused by a few different viruses, such as rotavirus and norovirus (previously known as parasites)

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are vomiting and watery diarrhoea. Other symptoms may include nausea, fever, abdominal pain/cramps, headache and muscle aches. Dehydration can follow. Symptoms can take between one and three days to develop and usually last between one and two days, sometimes longer.

Who is at risk from Viral Gastroenteritis infections?

- Potentially everyone
- Anyone with a lowered immunity or long-term illness.
- The elderly
- Babies and children

How can Viral Gastroenteritis

Viral gastroenteritis is highly infectious and is spread by vomit or faeces of an infected person through:

- Person-to-person contact, for example shaking hands with someone who has been sick and has the virus on their hands.
- Contaminated objects (e.g., furniture)
- Contaminated food or drink

Infection may also spread through aerosolised particles when people vomit. In most cases, spread occurs from a person who has symptoms. Some people can pass on the infection without symptoms, particularly in the first 48 hours after recovery.

How is it prevented?

Good Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent ALL infections, including the flu and the

common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day. Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection prevention and control team.

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled/dirty. There are a variety of brands on the market and are available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- You will be managed using special infection control precautions until at least 48 hours after your last episode of vomiting and / or diarrhoea has occurred, or there has been a negative pathology result confirmed by the Infection Control Staff.
- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of ALL infections.
- A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves and an apron or gown when they enter your room. The staff will also wear a mask whenever they are handling any vomitus or faecal matter. These items are disposed of in a separate waste bin as the staff member leaves your room.
- You will be allocated a private room with your own en-suite facilities. We ask that your movement throughout the ward is limited to essential movement only, such as physiotherapy. If you are unsure about when you can leave your room, please speak to the nursing staff.

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Can I still have visitors?

During your infectious period (whilst you are nauseated, vomiting, and still having episodes of diarrhoea), we recommend that you restrict the number of visitors you have to as few as possible. You may remain in contact with your relatives by the telephone in your room.

To prevent the spread of viral gastroenteritis, the nursing staff will provide education to your visitors about the need to wear protective equipment such as gloves and an apron or gown as well as instruct your visitors on the importance of strict hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to do this. They can use both soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol hand rub provided outside your room.

What happens when I go home?

Once your diarrhoea has stopped for at least 48 hours, the risk of infection is dramatically reduced. However, when you return home, it is important for you, your family, and your friends to continue the good hand hygiene practices. If you are still experiencing episodes of diarrhoea, then it is important any family member or close contact wear gloves for the washing of clothes, linen, or for the cleaning of the bath, toilet and shower. It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any vomitus, faeces, urine, wounds or blood. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.

If you have a reoccurrence or other family members develop symptoms, if you have more than one bathroom / toilet, try to isolate that bathroom / toilet for the affected family member(s) to use during their illness.

- Rest at home and do not attend work or school or childcare

- Do not prepare food for others or care for patients, children, or the elderly.
- Drink plenty of clear fluids, for example juice or soft drink diluted 1 part to 4 parts water, to prevent dehydration. Avoid undiluted fruit juice and soft drinks as they may increase dehydration and diarrhoea. Rehydration drinks that replace fluids lost are available from chemists.
- Thoroughly clean soiled items, surfaces, clothing, and bedding with hot water and detergent and allow to dry.

NB: These precautions should continue until 48 hours after the diarrhoea or vomiting stops. This includes people who prepare food in the home or working in the food industry.

Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department, ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively contact your Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055.

References

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017_013

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheet – Viral Gastroenteritis (27 July 2018)

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheet – Norovirus (14 May 2018)

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheet – Rotavirus (1 July 2012)